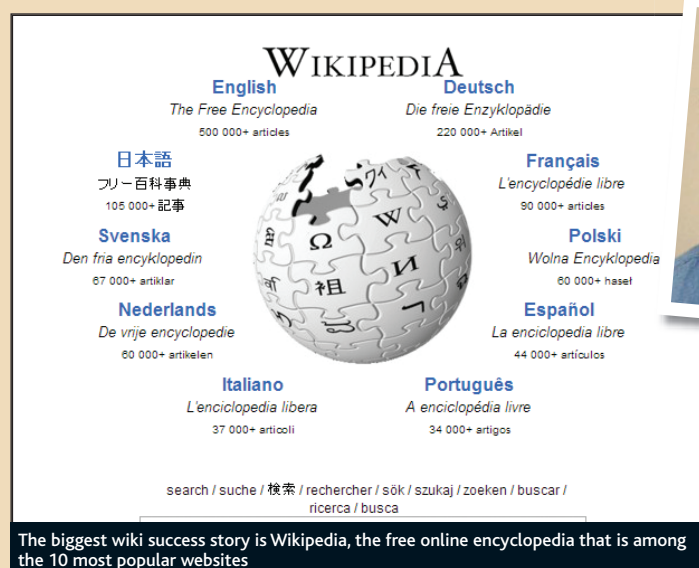




Wikis on the web

Imagine a website where pages are changed and published instantly by everyone who visits. Incredible as it sounds, such web-based collaboration is possible thanks to the wiki. Julian Prokaza explains how to be a part of this exciting free-for-all



▲ Ward Cunningham, inventor of the wiki – he came up with the name, too

a page, you can change it and if you think a page should be there but is missing, you can create it.

WIKI'S WORLD

The free exchange of information is what the internet is all about, but when you think about it, most web pages don't make a very good job of it. They're great if you want to share an idea with a large audience, but what if you want to hear what your audience has to say in return?

Message boards and forums are one way for people with a shared interest to supply feedback, as well as communicate with each other, but they're not ideal. Message threads can quickly become deeply nested and complex, and one rogue poster can send the whole thread off-topic. Large amounts of irrelevant information and constant repetition also make finding information very difficult. Such problems can be dealt with by a moderator, but message board moderation is a full-time job and no-one can spend all their time online.

Ward Cunningham faced this problem in 1995. He wanted to put together a website where people could share their ideas about computer programming. His solution was to concoct a site that allowed visitors to create, edit, delete and link between its pages as they saw fit. He decided that the "Yes, but..." factor – the feeling most people have when they read something with which they don't agree – would compel visitors to respond to the site by adding their own information.

He was right, too. Just 10 years on, the Portland Pattern Repository is still going strong. However, its content now covers far more than just computer programming. It's also more widely known by the term Cunningham coined to describe his idea: the wiki.

QUICK, QUICK, SLOW

'Wiki wiki' means quick in Hawaiian, and is the name of the shuttle buses at Honolulu airport. When Cunningham adopted the term for his new website, he was describing the speed at which new pages could be created and edited. The growth of most wikis, however, takes time.

A new page in a wiki usually begins as a mere collection of ideas, jotted down by someone who doesn't have the time or the knowledge to deliver them in more detail. As other people come across the page, some may append a few thoughts of their own; others may develop one or two ideas and add a link or two to other pages in the wiki, or simply make a few corrections.

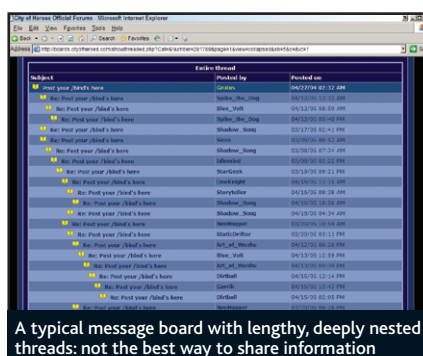
Over time, the page evolves from a few notes into a fully fleshed-out entry, with people adding or removing information as they see fit. The combined wiki workforce determines which information stays and which doesn't. Some pages are deleted as soon as they are created. If no-one sees fit to restore them, then the chances are that the page hasn't been missed and is probably redundant. Other pages are edited and re-edited until everyone is happy with the ideas it contains. It's survival of the fittest in action.

Admittedly, having several hands on the wheel can create problems. Surprisingly though, vandalism isn't one of them. You would think vandalism would be rife on any free-for-all website. Presumably, as anyone can delete a page easily, there's no challenge and so no point in wannabe hackers doing it. While vandalism can happen from time to time, most wikis have a core team of

They say many hands make light work, but if this were always true there would be 20 chefs in every kitchen and the best products would be designed by committees rather than ruined by them. Yet one place where collaborative efforts really are lessening the load is on the internet. In fact, collaborative projects are currently revolutionising the way in which information is created and collated online.

Where once web production seemed a complicated affair that only a few people could fathom, it is now something everyone can have a hand in. You can visit a page, change something you don't like and add something you think is missing; all you need is the right subject matter, a web browser and a wiki.

Wikis are websites that switch the responsibility of their creation and maintenance from the owner to the users. It sounds like a recipe for chaos, but bizarrely it works extremely well. Wikipedia, the wiki-based free online encyclopedia, recently published its 500,000th article and is now



A typical message board with lengthy, deeply nested threads: not the best way to share information

recorded as being one of the 10 most-visited sites on the internet.

Wikis are springing up all over the place, on all manner of topics, from encyclopedias to user manuals. They're all founded on the same set of principles, though, the most important being that anyone can edit a wiki. Some wikis require users to register before they can edit its content, but that's about it. The general idea is that if you don't like

WHERE ARE THE WIKIS?

Web-based collaborations are coming to an internet connection near you. Here are a few of the websites that enable users to share and share alike

HTTP://C2.COM



Home of the original wiki: the Portland Pattern Repository. This wiki is 10 years old but is still popular. However, it looks rather basic (not to mention chaotic) compared to more recent and sophisticated efforts. Still, it's a good place to start if you want to find out how wikis came to be and to understand the underlying principles, as there are lots of explanatory pages.

WWW.WIKIPEDIA.COM



Wikipedia is the largest wiki currently available. It is a vast encyclopedia, impressive when you consider that it's produced solely by volunteers. As with any reference work, it's best not to rely on Wikipedia as your only source of information but it's certainly more up to date than any printed reference.

WWW.EVERYTHING2.COM



If you thought Wikipedia was wide-ranging, wait until you see Everything2. This wiki was created and is

maintained and developed by people who like writing. Entries exist for just about anything you can imagine, and almost all are erudite and entertaining.

WWW.H2G2.COM



The ultimate in all-encompassing wikis, at least in concept. H2G2 is dedicated to *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and aims to be the realisation of the guide concocted by Douglas Adams in his works of the same name. It lacks the brio of the fictional 'real' thing and isn't as comprehensive as Everything2, but H2G2 is still an interesting project and one that anyone can get involved in.

WWW.WORLDWIDEWIKI.NET/WIKI/SWITCHWIKI



A wiki that catalogues the list of known wikis on the web. It's logical, really, although naming it SwitchWiki is guaranteed to confuse quite a few people. The list is long, running to 906 entries, and alphabetical, and also covers some interesting wiki-related topics.

enthusiastic users keeping an eye on things, so most abuse is quickly detected and dealt with.

But this core team of enthusiastic users can cause problems of their own. Some wikis draw criticism for suppressing opinions that differ from those of the people who spend the most time editing them. This manifests itself in the form of an 'edit war', where a page flip-flops between two states as it is repeatedly edited and re-edited. One solution is to encourage comments on entries rather than wholesale revision. Since all wikis maintain a change log that shows how a page has been changed, it's easy to see if there's a battle of editors going on behind the scenes. A perfect example of this can be found at Wikipedia, if you look at the entry for Habib R Sulemani. The entry itself is short, but the ensuing discussion about editors' ulterior motives (at <http://tinyurl.com/7eons>) goes on and on.

THE WRITE STUFF

At first glance there's little to distinguish a wiki from any other website, though the lack of formal structure on many wikis is a dead giveaway. Look more closely, though, and you'll find an edit link somewhere on the page. Click this, and a new page opens with the raw text, which you can then edit.

All wikis rely on an underlying engine to handle the simplified editing and linking of pages, as well as the version tracking for changes that are made. Normal web pages can be edited only using an HTML editor, and a basic knowledge of HyperText Markup Language (HTML) is required to create anything useful, not least a hyperlink. But wikis actively shun HTML in favour of a set of simple formatting rules that allow anyone to create pages.

The rules vary from engine to engine, but all allow such things as text formatting, lists and tables to be created through the use of simple text markers. To make a word appear in bold, for example, it is placed between three sets of apostrophes, like "so". Creating a hyperlink is equally straightforward: the most popular way is to enclose a word in brackets. For example, entering `[[shed]]` would create a hyperlink on the page to the wiki entry for 'shed'. If there is no such page, the link appears with a ? at the end to signify that it is a 'stub', a link that has no page to link to. Good wiki practice dictates that the stub should be turned into a page, even if it's just one that says, "This page has yet to be created". The fledgling page will then appear on a list of newly added pages, leaving someone else to add more details to it.

WHICH WIKI?

Many excellent wiki engines are available for free. Most require little in the way of effort or technical know-how to get them up and running. However,

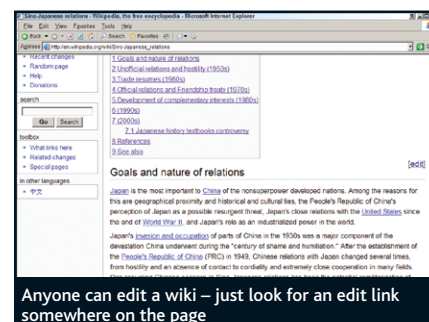
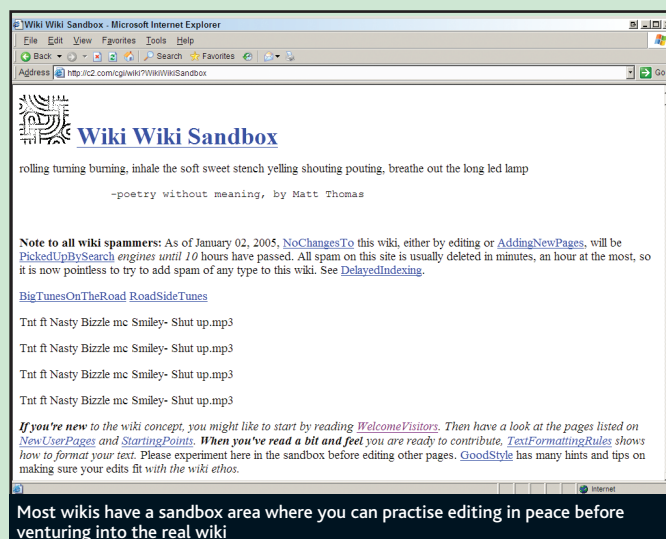
GETTING STARTED

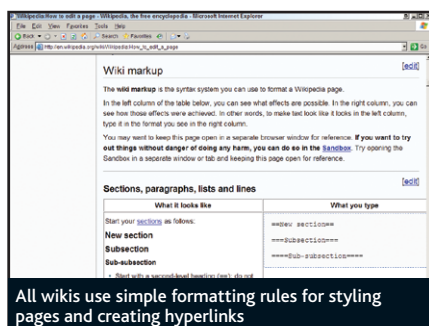
Anyone can edit a wiki. That's the whole point. If you want to contribute, you first need to find a wiki that interests you and browse around. Before you venture into the wiki properly, it's prudent to have some practice. Most wikis have a dedicated area called a sandbox for this purpose. The sandbox lets you play around with the wiki and make all the mistakes you want, without having to worry about anyone complaining. Most sandboxes are erased on a regular basis.

Once you've found your feet, head for the recent changes. Most wikis have a list of recent changes somewhere on the site. This is the best place to go if you want to get involved in regular maintenance. Try browsing through some changed pages and correcting any spelling or grammar mistakes you spot.

Once you start reading one page, you'll soon find yourself following link after link. You're bound to find a page that would

benefit from a link to other wiki pages, and you may find one that links to a stub page. This is your cue to start editing. It's wise to read the wiki's style guide first, though, just so that you're familiar with the formatting and linking conventions. Some wikis request that information is presented in a certain way. Wikipedia, for example, strives for neutrality in its entries rather than biased opinion. So an entry on "Why Port Vale rules" is likely to get heavily re-edited, for example.





since most also require server-side support for a programming language such as CGI, PHP, ASP or Perl, you'll probably need some internet savvy to make the most of them.

Choosing a wiki engine is less straightforward, not least because there are dozens to choose from. A good place to start your search is the list of wiki engines at the original Portland Pattern Repository wiki (<http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?wikiengines>). These are listed both alphabetically and by programming language, and many have at least one comment from a developer or user.

If you don't fancy server-side programming languages, try a wiki farm. This service, which is usually free, hosts your wiki for you, much like a web-hosting company. Once you've registered for an account, you're free to create your own wiki from scratch. The Portland Pattern Repository wiki also has a good list of wiki farms at <http://c2.com/cgi/wiki?wikifarms>. The tutorial on the right shows you how to get started with one at www.schtuff.com.

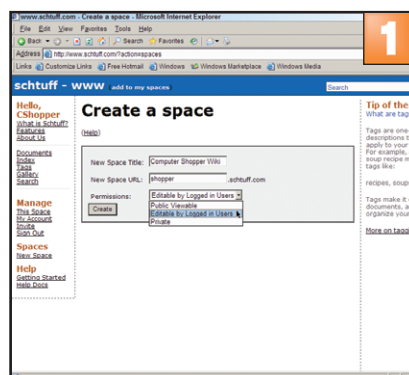
POWER OF THE PEOPLE

Wikis have been around for a decade, but only recently have they started to penetrate the masses. Much of this is due to the meteoric success of Wikipedia, but the 'next big thing' factor is also playing its part. Wikis address a genuine online need: for groups of people to communicate and collaborate with each other in a way that produces concise content, not page after impenetrable page of scrappy notes.

It's a bit premature to say that everyone wants a wiki, though. There's little doubt that most businesses would benefit from one, enabling employees to share information that isn't rendered useless by being filtered through layers of bureaucracy. Sadly, the idea of an unfettered forum for the free exchange of ideas will give most businesses a chronic case of the heebie-jeebies, so don't expect wikis to take the workplace by storm just yet. ☑

HOW TO... Create your own wiki

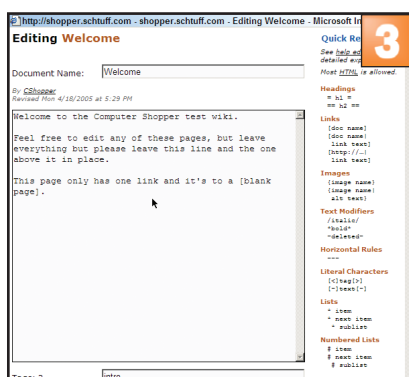
Creating your own wiki requires some web space on a server that supports CGI, PHP or another server-side programming language. But if you just want to dabble and this sounds too much like hard work, a wiki farm can take care of the web hosting for you. Here's how to get up and running at Schtuff (www.schtuff.com).



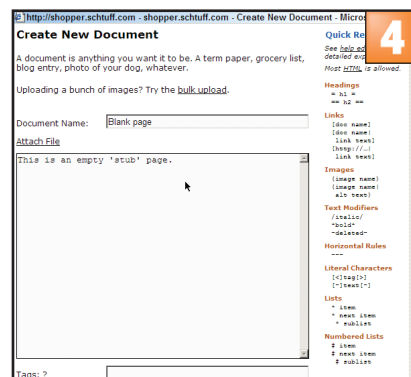
Once you've signed up for a free account at Schtuff, the first step is to create a new 'space', which is Schtuff's name for a wiki. Click the New Space link in the left column, give the space a name and decide whether it will be public or private.



The wiki starts off empty, so click the Creating a document link. A new window opens, into which you enter text (including HTML) or attach a file or image. To the right of this window are the text formatting rules for Schtuff wikis.



Once you've created a few pages, you can link them. Put the name of the page you want to link to between square brackets on the page you're linking from [like so]. The name of the page appears as a link. You can use other text or even link to an external website.



Should you create a link to a page that does not exist, Schtuff will not inform you of this fact. Instead, if you click on the link, you will be taken automatically to a blank page and you will then be prompted to create the page yourself.

WIKIPEDIA RULES

If you want to learn more about wikis then visit Wikipedia, a wiki-based online encyclopedia. It only started in 2001, but it is now the largest wiki on the web and it published its 500,000th article in March 2005. It includes among its contributors everyone from passing browsers to high-ranking academics.

Wikipedia was founded by Jimmy Wales, an ex-stock market trader from Chicago whose dealings had left him independently wealthy. He began a project called Wikipedia and its free-for-all approach proved successful – it

started growing at the rate of a few hundred articles each day.

Wikipedia exists in 195 different languages and gets 50 million hits a day, but it is still maintained by volunteers. Wales founded the non-profit Wikimedia foundation in 2003 to support Wikipedia and its spin-offs.

Despite its popularity, Wikimedia is not regarded highly by many people. Its open nature means that Wikipedia is perhaps the most up-to-date encyclopedia available, but it also means there is no guarantee that the

information is correct. It discourages original works, however, in favour of a neutral view that is intended to show both sides of a dispute.

Article bias is a criticism often levelled at Wikipedia. Pop culture topics tend to receive more coverage than serious subjects. However, Wikipedia is aware of its flaws. In its entry for article bias, Wikipedia says that the reference for *Coronation Street* used to be twice as long as that for Tony Blair. However, this imbalance was rectified soon after, so at least the community is taking notice.